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To Nancy

Frederick Wedmore

Fiction (English)

Wednesday
NCM

TO NANCY



To Nancy

1

BY

Sir FREDERICK WEDMORE^{o. 6}
—

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1905

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"To Nancy" was first issued in *The Savoy*. Then, in a book I shall not, as a whole, reprint. Now, in the form it definitely takes, it stands alone—like the "Dream of Provence" ("Orgeas and Miradou"), from the same volume.

F. W.

London: February, 1905.



TO NANCY.¹

WEYMOUTH,

29th September.

IT happens that I have seen much of you, Nancy, at an eventful moment—eventful for yourself I mean, in your life and your career—and here, because I like you, and like to think of and reflect on you, there is written down, straight and full, the record of my impression : concealing nothing, though written to yourself : a letter absolutely frank, looking all facts in the face ; for, young though you are, you are intelligent enough to bear them. My letter you may find tedious, perhaps, but at all events unusual ; for letters, even

¹ A letter from Mr. Clement Ashton, the distinguished Painter, to Miss Nancy Nanson, of the Variety Theatres.

when detailed, generally omit much, hide some part of a thought—put the thing in a way that pleases the writer, or is intended to please the receiver. Here am I at the end of my first page, Nancy, and all preface ! Well, I shall recall, to begin with, how it was that I met you.

Acquit me, please, of any general love of your over-praised Music Hall. Neither it nor the Theatre counts for much in my life. I like you personally : I imagine a Future for you ; but I am not anxious for “the status of the Profession.” Life, it is just possible, has other goals than that of being received in smart drawing-rooms—whatever Art you practise, its practice is your reward. Society, my dear, has bestowed of late upon the stage “lover” an attention that is mis-

placed. We are getting near the end of it: and, at afternoon teas, the *cabotin*, in a frock coat, no longer dominates the situation. Youths from the play-house have, in the Past, over the luncheon-table, imparted to me, with patronage, their views about Painting: to me, Nancy, to your old friend, who has painted for thirty years—a full Academician one year since, with but few honours (as men call them) left to gain: few years, alas! in which to live to gain them. Child as you are, your common sense—that neatly balanced little mind of yours, so unusually clear—that neatly-balanced mind assures you that it is not the profession you follow, but what you have been able to do in it, and what you really are, that gives you—I mean of course, gives any one—legitimate claim to be in privileged

places, to be motioned to the velvet of the social sward. "Artist," indeed! As well expect to be received with welcome for having had sufficient capital to buy a camp stool and a few feet of German moulding with which to frame a canvas sent to the Dudley Gallery, as to be suffered to dictate and to dogmatise in virtue of a well-worn coat and an appearance at a London theatre!

You have read so far, and yet I have not reminded you how it was that you and I came to know each other. It was just two years ago, in this Weymouth from which I write to you. I saw a photograph that struck me, at the door of your place of entertainment—at the door of the "People's Delight." The face was young—but I have known youth. Pretty, it was—but a fashionable

portrait-painter lives with prettiness. It was so monstrously refined.

At three o'clock, they said, there would be an entertainment—Miss Nancy Nanson would certainly be seen. And in I went, with a companion—old Sir James Purchas, of Came Manor—my host more than once in these parts. Sir James, you know, is not a prey to the exactions of conventionality, and there was no reason why the humble entertainment your lounge and shelter offered to the tripper should not afford us half an hour's amusement.

The blazing September afternoon you recollect—September with the glare of the dog days. The “people,” it seemed, were not profiting that day by the “People’s Delight,” for the place was all but empty—everyone out of doors—

and we wandered, not aimlessly indeed, but not successfully, among those cavernous, half-darkened regions, among the stalls for fruits and sweets and cheap jewelry, in search of a Show. A turn, and we came suddenly on rows of empty chairs placed in front of a small stage, with drawn curtains; and, at a money-taker's box (for reserved seats, as I supposed)—leaning over the money-taker's counter, in talk with someone who came, it may be, from a selling-stall—there was a child, a little girl. Sir James touched my arm, directing my attention to her, and I took the initiative—said to the little girl: “We came to see Miss Nancy Nanson. You can tell us, perhaps, when is the Show going to begin?” “There won't be any entertainment this afternoon,” the girl answered; “because, you

see, there isn't any audience. I am Miss Nancy Nanson." The dignity of the child !

The fact was, you remember, that photograph at the entrance gave the impression of a girl of seventeen ; and I did not at all connect it with the figure of the silver-voiced, well-spoken, elegant child, who proved to be yourself—since then my model and my youthful friend. But the moment you spoke, and when my eyes, still not quite used to the obscurity, took in your real face and those refined expressions, the identity was established, though the photograph, with its dexterous concealment, showed more the Nancy Nanson you were going to be, than the Nancy Nanson that you were. I was pleased, nevertheless ; and we talked about yourself for a few

minutes ; and when you said (because I asked you) that there would be an entertainment next day, I told you we would come to see it, certainly. And Sir James was indulgent. And I am a man of my word.

And now there is a bit we can afford to hurry over ; for the next stage of our acquaintance does not advance, appreciably, the action of your story. We came ; we saw your entertainment : your three "turns" ; singing, dancing : and pretty enough it was—but yet, so-so. You were such a pleasant child, of course we applauded you—so refined, yet singing, tolerably, such nonsense. Even then, it was your charming little personality, you know—it was not your performance that had in it attractiveness. Next day, I left the neighbourhood.

For two years after that, I never saw Miss Nancy Nanson, "vocalist and dancer"; only once heard of and read of you—only once, perhaps, thought of you. The once was last Christmas—your name, I saw, was advertised in a pantomime in London—played by "juveniles." I might, it is just possible, have gone to see it. But the average "juvenile!"—think!—and then, the influenza and the weather!

Well! this present glowing September, Nancy—glowing and golden as it was two years ago—brought me again, and very differently, into touch with you. The Past is over. Now I fix your attention—for you are still patient with me—I fix your attention on the Present, and I point out to you, in detail—I realise to myself—how the time is critical, event-

ful ; how you stand, Nancy, upon a certain brink. I am not going to prophesy what you may be ; but I tell you what you are. The real You, you know : something better and deeper than that which those seven Pastels, any or all of them together, show you—my delighted notes of your external beauty ; touched, I think, with some charm of grace that answers well to your own ; and mimicking, not badly, the colours and contours of your stage presence. Nothing more. Chance gleams—an artist's "snap-shots" at Miss Nancy Nanson, vocalist and dancer, at sixteen. (Sixteen yesterday). But *you*—No !

This present September—a fortnight since—I came again to Weymouth ; this time alone ; putting up at the old "Gloucester" (it was George the Third's house)

from which I write to you ; and not at Came Manor, in the neighbourhood. In the Weymouth of to-day one is obliged, in nearly every walk, to pass the " People's Delight"—your cheap vulgarity, my dear, that the great Georgian time would have resented. I passed it soon, and the two names biggest upon the bills were, " Achilles, the Strong Man"—there are things in which even a decayed watering place cannot afford to be behind the fashion, and the "strong man" is in fashion to-day—"Achilles, the Strong Man," then; and "Miss Nancy Nanson." Again did I go in ; took the seat, exactly, that I had taken two years since, in the third row of chairs ; and while a band of three made casual, lifeless, introductory music, I waited for the Show.

The curtain rose presently on a great,

living, breathing, over-energetic statue—a late Renaissance bronze, by John of Bologna, he seemed—that muscular piece of colour and firm form, that nigger, posed effectively, and of prodigious force. “John of Bologna”—but you never heard of him ! Then he began his operations—Achilles, the Strong Man—holding, and only by his teeth, enormous weights ; and rushing round with one, two, hundredweight, as if it were a feather ; lifting, with that jaw of his, masses of iron ; crashing them on the stage again, and standing afterwards with quivering muscles, heaving chest. Applause—I joined in it myself, in common courtesy—and then the curtain fell.

A wait. The band struck up again—it was your first “turn.” A slim and dainty figure, so very slight, so very young, in a

lad's evening dress, advanced with swift-ness towards the footlights, and bowed in a wide sweep that embraced everyone. Then you began to sing—and not too well, you know—a song of pretty-enough sentiment ; the song of a stripling whose sweetheart was his mother. His mother, she sufficed for him. It suited your young years. A tender touch or two, and with a boy's manliness. Applause ! You vanished.

You vanished to return. In a girl's dress this time, with movements now more swift and now more graceful. Another song, and, this time, dancing with it. It was dancing you were born for. "She has grown another being—and yet with the old pleasantness—in these two years," I thought. "A child no longer." In colour and agility you were a brilliant

show. I have told you since, in talking, what I thought of you. You were not a Sylvia Grey, my dear ; still less that other Sylvia Voltaire praised, contrasting her with the Camargo. The Graces danced like Sylvia, Voltaire said—like the Camargo, the wild Nymphs. No ! you were not Voltaire's Sylvia, any more than you were Sylvia Grey. Sylvia Grey's dance is perfect, from the waist upwards—as an observant actress pointed out to me, with whom I saw it. Swan-like in the holding, and slow movement, of the head and neck ; exquisite in the undulations of the torso. Where Sylvia Grey ends—I mean where her remarkableness ends (for she has legs like another, I take it)—you, my dear, begin. Your modelling wants an Ingres to do it justice. The slimness of the girl, and

what a fineness, as of race ; and then, the agility of infinite practice, and sixteen young years !

A third "turn"—then it was that you were agile most of all. The flying feet went skyward. Black shoes rushed, rocket-like, so far above your head, and clattered on the floor again ; whilst against the sober crimson of the background curtain—a dull, thin stuff, stretched straight—gleamed the white of moving skirts, and blazed the boss of brightest scarlet that nestled somewhere in the brown gold of your head. Then, flushed and panting, it was over.

Next day, in a gaunt ante-room, or extra chamber, its wooden floor quite bare, and the place furnished only with a couple of benches and a half-voiceless semi-grand piano—the wreck of an Erard

that was great once—in that big, bare room, Nancy, where my Pastels since have caught your pose, in lilac, rose and orange, but never your grave character, I came upon, and closely noted, and, for a quarter of an hour, talked to, a sedate young girl in black—a lady who, in all her bearing, ways, gesture, silver voice, was as refined as any, young or old, that I have been in contact with, in my long life—and I have lived abundantly amongst great ladies, from stately, restful Quakeress to the descendant of the “hundred Earls.” No one is more refined than you. This thing may not last with you. Whether it lasts, depends, in great measure, upon the life you lead, in the strange world opening to you. Your little craft, Nancy, your slender skiff, will have some day to labour over voluminous seas.

You remember what you told me, in the great ante-room, standing by the wreck of the Erard, that your fingers touched All your life to that time. You were frankness, absolutely ; standing there in your dull, black frock, that became you to perfection ; standing with hat of broad, black straw—the clear-cut nose, the faultless mouth, the bright-brown hair curled short about your head, and the limpid look of your serene eyes, steadily grey. It was interesting, and amusing too, your story. I told you, you remember, how much you had got on, how changed you were, what progress I had noticed. And you said a pretty “Thank you.” It was clear that you meant it. We were friends. I asked who taught you—so far as anything *can* be taught, in this world, where, at bottom,

one's work, one's progress, is one's own. You said, your mother. And I told you I'd seen your name in some London Christmas play-bill. "I had a big success," you said. What a theatrical moment! —the one occasion, in all my little dealings with you, in which I found the traditions of "the Profession" stronger with you than your own personal character. Now, your own personal instinct is to be modest and natural; the traditions of "the Profession" are to boast. You did boast, Nancy! You had a big success, had you? Perhaps, for yourself; I do not say you failed. But the piece—my dear, you know it was a frost. Did it run three weeks? Come now! And someone, out of jealousy, paid four guineas—she or her friends did—to get you a bad notice somewhere in back-


stairs journalism. And they got it, and then repented of it. You were friends with them afterwards. But what a world, Nancy!—a world in which, for four guineas, a scoundrel contributes his part towards damning your career!

You remember, before I asked if I might make some sketches of you, you were turning over a song that had been sent you by a “gentleman at Birmingham.” He had had it “ruled” for you, and wanted you to buy it for three pounds. It was “rather a silly song,” you thought. I settled myself quietly to master the sense, or, as was more probable, the nonsense, of it. My dear, it was blank rubbish! But you were not going to have it, you said. “Mamma would never buy a song I didn’t like and take to.” That was well, I thought.

And then you slowly closed the ruined Erard, and were going away. But on the road down-stairs, remember, I persuaded you to ask your mother that you might give me sittings. I told you who I was. And in the gaunt ante-room, lit well from above, I had a sitting next day. It was the first of several. And your mother trusted me, and trusted you, as you deserve to be trusted. And we worked hard together, didn't we?—you posing, and I drawing. And there are seven Pastels which record—*tant bien que mal*, my dear—the delightful outside of you, the side the public might itself see, if it had eyes to really see—the flash of you in the dance, snow-white or carmine ; and I got all that with alacrity—“swift means” I took, to “radiant ends,”—the poise of the slim figure, the white frock

slashed with gold, the lifted foot, and that gleam of vivid scarlet in your hair, against the background of most sober crimson.

This tranquil Sunday I devote to writing to you, is the day after your last appearance at the "People's Delight." You and your mother, very soon, you tell me, leave Weymouth and your old associations—it is your home, you know—and you leave it for ever. The country, you admit, is beautiful, but you are tired of the place. I don't much wonder. And you leave it—the great Bay, the noble chalk Downs, the peace of Dorset and its gleaming quiet—you leave it for lodgings in the Waterloo Road. For you must be amongst the agents for the Halls. Though you have been upon the Stage since you were very little, you have



but lately, so you say, "put your heart into it." Well! it is not unnatural. But no more Sunday drives into the lovely country, recollect, with your brother, who is twenty-one and has his trade; and your uncle, who is in a good way of business here, you said—your uncle, the plumber.

And so, last night being your last night, Nancy, it was almost like a Benefit. As for your dancing, you meant, I knew, to give us the cup filled—yes, filled and running over. I had noticed that, on some earlier evening, when Little Lily Somebody—a dumpling child, light of foot, but with not one delightful "line" in all her meaningless, fat form—when Lily Somebody had capered her infantile foolishness, to the satisfaction of those who rejoice in mere babyhood, someone

presented her with a bouquet. And you danced excellently, just after her—you, height and grace, slimness and soul—and someone, with much effusion, handed you up a box of chocolates. And you smiled pleasantly. I saw there was a little conflict in your mind, however, between the gracious recognition of what was well-enough meant, and the resentment—well, the resentment we can hardly call it: the regret, at all events—at being treated so very visibly as a child—and yesterday you were to be sixteen! So I myself—who, if this small indignity had not been offered you, might conceivably have given you, in private, at all events, a basket of fine fruit—I meant to offer you flowers. It might have been fruit, I say, if smuggled into the ante-room where I had done my Pastels; for

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I had seen you once there, crunching, quite happily, imperfect apples between perfect teeth—your perfect teeth, almost the only perfect things, Nancy, in an imperfect world.

But it had to be flowers. So I sent round to the dressing-room, just as you were getting ready, two “button-holes” merely—wired “button-holes”—of striped carnations, red or wine-coloured. They were not worn in your first turn. They were not worn in your second. In your third turn, I espied them at your neck’s side, in the fury of your dance. Already there are people, I suppose, who would have thought those striped carnations happy—tossed, tossed to pieces, in the warmth of your throat.

Your second turn, last night, you know, was in flowing white, slashed with gold

—old-gold velvet—with pale stockings. The third—when the flowers died happy in your riot—in pure white alone, with stockings black. You remember the foot held in your hand, as you swing round upon the other toe—and one uplifted leg seen horizontal, in its straight and modelled slimness.

My dear—what were my little flowers? Who could have known—when you had finished—the great things still to come? When the applause seemed over, and the enthusiasm of some subaltern from Dorchester was, as I take it, abated or suppressed—when the applause was over, a certain elocutionist (Mr. Paris Brown, wasn't it?) brought you again upon the stage, and saying it was your last appearance, made you some presentation: a brooch from himself, “of no intrinsic

value" he informed us—I willingly believed him—a bracelet from I don't know who—that *had* an "intrinsic value," I surmise—and a bouquet—exquisite! It was "From an admirer," Mr. Paris Brown, the elocutionist, read out, from an accompanying card. Then he congratulated you upon your Past; prophesied as to your Future; and, in regard to the presents to you, he said, in words that were quite happily chosen—because, Nancy, they were reticent while they were expressive—"She is but a—*girl*; and she has done her duty by the Management. Long may she be a credit to her father and mother!" Your mother I was well aware of—your mother I respect; and you, you love her. But your father—he was invented, I think, for the occasion, as an additional protec-

tion, should the designs upon you of the admirer from Dorchester prove to be not altogether such as they ought to be. The precaution was unnecessary ; it was taking Time by the forelock. Our young friend looked ingenuous, and smitten grievously—you seem so big upon the stage, Nancy—so grown up, I mean. I could, I think, have toned down his emotions, had I told him you were a bare sixteen.

Nancy, there is—for me—a certain pathos in this passage of yours from childhood into ripening girlhood ; a book closed, as it were ; a phase completed ; an ending of the way. “What chapter is to open ? Nancy Nanson—what phase or facet of her life,” I ask myself, “is now so soon to be presented ? What other way, what unfamiliar one, is to follow her

blameless and dutiful childhood?" I had a restless night, Nancy. Thinking of this, one saw—ridiculously perhaps—a presage in the first bouquet, a threat in the first bracelet—in the admirer's card. Would she be like the rest?—at least, so many of them. Besmirched, too?

Remember, Nancy, I am no Puritan at all. I recognise Humanity's instincts. There is little I do not tolerate. I recognise the gulf that separates the accidentally impolitic from the essentially wrong. But we owe things to other people—to the World's laws. We have responsibilities. *Noblesse oblige*; and all superiority is *Noblesse*. "She must *not* be like the rest," I said, last night, in broken dreams; "dining, winking, leering even, since sold at last and made common." In broken dreams, last night

—or in wakeful hours—your feet tossed higher : your gay blood passed into the place—electrical, overpowering. You can be so grave and sweet, you know ; and you can be so mad.

Have you ever lain awake, in the great, long darkness, and watched in the darkness a procession—the people of your Past and all your Future ? But you have no Past. For myself, I have watched them. My mother, who is long gone ; those who were good to me, and whom I slighted ; the relations who failed me ; the friend I lost. And the uncertain figures of the Future ! But the line of the Future is short enough for me—for you, it is all yours. Last night, it seemed to me, the dark was peopled with your enemies ; with your false friends, who were coming—always coming—the un-

avoidable crowd of the egotistic destroyers of youth. Their dark hearts, I thought, look upon her as a prey : some of them cruel, some of them cynical, yet some of them only careless. And I wished that last night had not come—your sixteenth birthday—with the applause, and gifts, and menacing triumph.

There are women, perhaps, men cannot wrong—since they have wronged themselves too much. “This is a good girl,” I said ; and my over-anxious mind—in real affection for her—cries out to all the horrid forces of the world : “Leave Nancy !”

Nancy, when you read this, you smile—and naturally—at your most sombre friend. You think, of course, with all the reckless trust, courageous confidence, of girlhood, “So unnecessary !”

Go the straight way! . . . Whatever way you go, I shall always be your friend.

CLEMENT ASHTON.

The End.



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